

Fund for Social Change Donors vs. the System

by Fred Scaglione

By foundation standards, the Fund for Social Change is relatively small. It primarily administers the philanthropy of two anonymous donors and a donor's collaborative, each giving away approximately \$1 million a year. Yet it has very big goals and, against all odds, it already has had enormous impacts, particularly in helping to guide the transformation of New York City's Child Welfare System.

The Fund for Social Change began its work informally in 1992, when its Executive Director, David Tobis, was approached by a friend seeking assistance in making grants to help children. At that time, Tobis was working at Hunter College's Center for the Study of Family Policy and consulting with the World Bank and UNICEF on the de-institutionalization of Eastern European orphanages. Together, Tobis and the donor created the Child Welfare Fund.

Unlike many children's charities, the Child Welfare Fund has a very definite point of view. "The idea was that people have a right to participate in the decisions which affect their lives," says Tobis. "When you looked at the child welfare system, parents and children didn't have any kind of role." Tobis believes that this lack of input from families accounts in large part for many of the child welfare system's most dysfunctional aspects – its traditional over reliance on out of home placement, inadequate in-home supports for families and a very troubled Family Court system. The result, says Tobis, was a system which often did more damage to the children and families it intended to help.

In response, a significant portion of the Child Welfare Fund grants have gone towards empowering parents and

children within the system. The Fund has sought out and even helped to create dozens of grass roots organizations run by and representing parents with children in foster care and foster care youth themselves.

CWF played a crucial role in establishing the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a group which provides support and self-advocacy training for parents involved with ACS. Over the years, CWOP has developed a formal training program for Parent Advocates, many of whom now work in child welfare agencies. CWOP has also become a respected public advocate on behalf of children and families with respect to child welfare policy, regulation and family law.

The Fund was one of the first funders for LIFT (Legal Information for Families Today). "We had a fellowship program at CUNY Law School and Karen Simmons applied for a fellowship to work in child welfare," says Tobis. "She wanted to create a group to help parents who didn't have representation in Family Court. They give out information on parents rights. We started them with a \$25,000 grant. Now they are in every court in the city."

As with LIFT, CWF has been the first funder for a wide range of other groups, often started by passionate advocates, working on various aspects of child welfare reform. Its grantees have included Voices of Youth, Parents United for Children, Youth Advocacy Center, The Center for Family Representation, New Yorkers for Children and many, many others. It



David Tobis

helped launch and has supported the publication of Represent, a magazine written by and for young people in foster care, and Child Welfare Watch, a periodic analysis of issues and trends within the child welfare system with a focus on family-centered outcomes and the rights of children and parents. CWF also funds groups outside the child welfare system itself if they have an impact on systems affecting the lives of children and families. For example, CWF was the initial funder for the Welfare Rights Initiative which trains recipients of public assistance to advocate on their own behalf and for policy reform.

The Fund's grants are equally divided between direct services and system reform. "You need the direct service to see where the patterns of problems are. Then, you can fund system reform to address those problems," says Tobis.

Unlike many foundations, CWF also is prepared to support like-minded and effective organizations for the long haul.

For information about the Fund for Social change,
visit www.fundforsocialchange.org or call 212-529-0110.

FOUNDATIONS

"Part of our strategy is to find groups that do good work and are close to our mission and fund them for the long term," says Tobis. "We have funded Represent for 15 years. We have funded CWOP for 12 years." At the same time, Tobis wants groups to find other sources of funding. "After three years we gave LIFT a challenge grant on the condition that they seek public funding," he explains. "Now they get funding through the courts and have a budget of close to \$1 million."

Not all of CWF's grantees succeed. Grass roots advocates are not always capable making the transition to organization management. "The Child Welfare Fund donor is willing to take risks," says Tobis. "She is generous, courageous and trusts the work we do. We believe that if you do not have failures, you are not taking enough risks." The Fund offers technical assistance through the Community Resource Exchange to help grantees with board development, financial management, grant writing and the other skill sets necessary to carry a cause forward.

In 2000, Tobis was approached by a second anonymous donor seeking to fund causes involving autism, homelessness, and domestic violence. The FAR Fund, which emerged from this collaboration, shares some of the CWF philosophy but with a different programmatic focus. It has funded a range of projects designed to strengthen consumer voice and involvement in the delivery of their own developmental disability services. "We are focused on the ability of consumers to live individualized lives," says Tobis.

The FAR Fund has supported a three-year collaboration with New York State's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to infuse "person-centered planning" into three agencies serving adults on the autistic spectrum. "Each agency identified ten people with severe autism and developed personalized goals with them so they could get jobs, housing and be integrated into the community," says Tobis. "The results are quite dramatic. The cultures and structures of those agencies have begun to change in the process."

The FAR Fund has supported publication of Developmental Disabilities

Watch, similar in format to the Child Welfare Watch, as an independent monitor of issues and trends within the developmental disabilities services system. It has also supported groups representing consumers and self-advocates with disabilities as well as research and evaluation into effective services for individuals with autism.

The FAR Fund has offered a broad range of grants and supports in its other areas of programmatic focus. In 2005, it made 12 grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000 for prevention of violence against youth. Among the grantees Dwa Fann which received \$20,000 to provide legal representation for Haitian women affected by domestic violence, and El Puente, which received \$15,000 for a youth-led campaign to reduce school violence in Bushwick. The FAR Fund has funded policy studies, scholarships and the FAR Fund Fellowship program supported individuals working within one of its focus areas.

The Fund for Social Change has also leveraged the philanthropic impact of its own donors through collaborations with other funders.

The Partnership for Family Supports, the Fund's third major program, was created in 2001 in cooperation with the Open Society Institute with a goal of piloting systemic change within the child welfare system. It appears to be doing just that.

The Partnership's first project was Bridge Builders, an innovative approach to child welfare services targeting the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx. Bridge Builders is more than community-based. It is community-wide and community-run. Bridge Builders brings together 12 different nonprofit organizations, most with long histories in Highbridge, to create a coordinated network of family supports and services. CWOP provides and trains parent advocates. Bronx Defenders offers family court representation to families with children in foster care or at risk of entering the system. Several ACS-funded preventive services agencies provide in-home and agency-based family counseling and assistance. To support the project, the Fund for Social Change put together a donors collaborative of 13 grantmakers.

Tobis believes that Bridge Builders is a model for the future of child welfare services in New York City. The Administration for Children's Services appears to agree. It recently awarded the first three pilot projects in its new Community Partnership Initiative (CPI). Another nine CPI projects are expected to be awarded during the coming year. The \$150,000 grants are designed to support the development of community-based child welfare programming which sounds remarkably like Bridge Builders. Bridge Builders, itself, was one of the first three grantees.

Looking back, the Child Welfare Fund has accomplished a tremendous amount in a short period of time. "There has been a lot of progress," says Tobis. "There are 60 parent advocates working in foster care agencies around the city. The passage of Intro 492 now requires the ACS Commissioner to have an advisory board of parents. I think the Child Welfare Fund has changed the terms of the debate. We have decreased the demonization of parents." Perhaps most important, the city itself has come to see out-of-home placement as a step of last resort. As a result the number of children living in foster care is now less than half what it was in 1992 when the Child Welfare Fund was established.

Looking ahead, Tobis believes there is still much to do. "We want to start an organization of children in foster care to give them a greater voice at the table," he says. He also hopes to develop a scholarship program so that parents who have been trained as parent advocates can go on to college. "They have so much potential," he says. The program would provide more than just tuition. These parents need a range of additional supports including child care, employment services and programs to help them prepare for the college experience, both academically and emotionally.

The Fund for Social Change is also interested in working with additional donors to create new donor-advised funds. "We work very closely with our donors," he says. "You are not just dropping your money off at a big institution and going away." He believes that the model works well for donors looking to make an impact. It already has a track record to prove it.